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DEPARTMENT FOR WHA/CAN AND NEA/IR

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SUBJECT: Toronto's Iranian Diaspora

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Sensitive but Unclassified: Please Protect Accordingly.

11. (SBU) SUMMARY: At over 60,000 residents, Toronto's Iranian Community is a small but visible group in a city where over half of its 4 million people are foreign-born. Concentrated in the northern neighborhoods and suburbs of Canada's largest city, Toronto's Iranian community is constantly growing, sustained by liberal Canadian immigration policies, the draw of family already here, employment opportunities, excellent educational institutions, and changing political conditions in Iran itself. Drawing on conversations with Iranian community representatives, 2006 Canadian Census data, online resources, and consular databases, this cable profiles a small, strategically important, but in our experience politically disengaged immigrant community in Canada's most diverse metropolis. END SUMMARY.

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Iranian Immigration to Toronto  
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12. (U) The first substantial wave of Iranian immigration to Toronto (as well as Montreal and Vancouver, the other major Canadian immigrant destinations) arrived in the decade following the 1978-1979 Islamic revolution, as the Iranian diaspora sought havens in Western Europe, the United States, and Canada. Canada's relatively liberal immigration and refugee acceptance policies have allowed a steady stream of family and employment-based immigration to Canada over the past three decades, a trend that gained momentum in the 1990s, when over 20,000 Iranian nationals immigrated to Canada. Throughout, a plurality has settled in Toronto; recent Statistics Canada census data shows that 44% of Canada's Iranian community lives in the Greater Toronto Census Metropolitan Area (CMA). Of the nearly 28,000 Iranian immigrants arriving in Canada between 2001 and 2006, 14,010 initially settled in the Toronto CMA, with Montreal, Vancouver, and Ottawa absorbing most of the rest.

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A Self-Contained Community  
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¶3. (U) In a city with over 180 nationalities, the Iranian community is relatively small, particularly compared with the massive and largely unassimilated Chinese and South Asian communities, and the more assimilated, but still prominent Italian and Portuguese communities. Based on census data surveying "mother tongue" (which includes Iranian citizens as well as residents of Iranian ethnicity that have Canadian or other citizenship), 65,025 or 1.2% of residents in the Toronto CMA are Farsi speakers. In comparison, nearly 400,000 Toronto CMA residents count a Chinese dialect as their mother tongue, and 190,000 residents indicate Italian is their preferred language. The number of Farsi speakers is roughly equal to French speakers (an official language for all government services in Toronto and Ontario), and slightly ahead of the number of Arabic speakers.

¶4. (SBU) The Iranian community is concentrated in the northern reaches of the City of Toronto, and the near north suburb of Richmond Hill. Census data shows that Farsi speakers live in a self-contained, almost insular, community.

¶5. (SBU) In 11 of Toronto's 1,076 CMA census tracts, Farsi is the second most common mother tongue (after English). Seven of those tracts abut a 2 km. stretch of Yonge Street, Toronto's major North-South thoroughfare, with the remainder scattered throughout the city. In 49 other census tracts clustered primarily in the northern suburbs, the concentration of Farsi speakers is higher than the 1.2% Greater Toronto CMA average.

¶6. (SBU) Many Iranians speak only Farsi at home. Of the 22,795 Farsi-speaking City of Toronto residents (as opposed to the much larger Census Metropolitan Area), nearly 64% reported using only Farsi in their homes. In nearby Richmond Hill, one of the wealthiest suburbs, 55% of 6,815 Farsi speakers use the language exclusively at home.

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¶7. (SBU) The physical landscape of these neighborhoods of northern Toronto reflects this preference for using Farsi in daily life. Farsi signs dominate storefronts along several blocks of Yonge Street. Restaurants, news kiosks, money changers, real estate agents, and banks all make active efforts to court Farsi-speaking customers. Several Shi'a mosques in Toronto cater to the Iranian community. Annual Nowruz celebrations in North York draw tens of thousands. The same area is home to a large number of Chinese and Korean immigrants, and abuts a Russian, largely Jewish neighborhood. All seem to coexist peacefully.

¶8. (SBU) Toronto is also home to a vibrant Farsi media. Iranian satellite television channels based in Los Angeles are available on cable systems, and two basic cable networks run regular programming in Farsi. Toronto-based Iranians publish internet blogs in Farsi and English, and several Farsi newspapers publish on a weekly basis. Based on Farsi-language newspaper and TV advertising, one could gain the impression that the overriding passions of the Iranian community are real estate and matchmaking services. Hundreds of real estate agents of Iranian descent advertise in Toronto's Farsi media, focusing on the condo boom that is particularly intense in the northern suburbs heavily populated by the Iranian community.

¶9. (SBU) Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC) statistics suggest concerted efforts to compete for the "Iranian Pocketbook" are well-justified. Iran is regularly among the top 10 countries of origin for recipients of investor and entrepreneur immigrant visas to Canada.

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Little Appetite for Political Activity  
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¶10. (SBU) Contacts in the Iranian community, when queried about their attitudes towards political developments in Iran, assert that the Iranians in Toronto are by and large disengaged from developments in their homeland. Mohsen Taghavi, editor of the Farsi/English weekly "Salaam Toronto" told Poloff that the 2008

Majlis elections, and other political events in Iran, have generated little or no interest in the community. Taghavi, who immigrated to Canada in the late 1990s asserted that interest may rise again if a credible reformer were to run for high office, but in the meantime, a wide cross-section of the Iranian immigrant community has disengaged from political events in their homeland.

¶11. (SBU) Behnam Esfanizadeh, chairman of the Toronto Iranian Community Group, a North-York based organization, lamented that it was impossible to organize the community around any sort of political issue, either in Iran or Canada. Esfanizadeh detailed difficulties in founding the "Iranian Canadian Congress" in November 2007, as a forum for focusing the Iranian community in Toronto on broader political issues. While active, Esfanizadeh admitted the organization had not achieved the hoped-for goal of politically energizing Iranians in Toronto.

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Students: The New Wave  
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¶12. (SBU) The Iranian student community is a large, organized, and visible presence at all major universities in Ontario. CIC statistics suggest the number of Iranian students in Canada has doubled since 2003, with many, if not most studying at Ontario universities. Some institutions, like the University of Waterloo (UW) and the University of Western Ontario (UWO), host a significant number of Iranian graduate students in the sciences. Many graduate students in Toronto are studying physics, mechanical engineering, and biology. Others study nuclear engineering (NOTE: UW and UWO, in conjunction with McMaster University, offer a master's degree program in nuclear reactor design called the University Network of Excellence in Nuclear Engineering. END NOTE).

¶13. (SBU) Based on anecdotal evidence from U.S. visa interviews,

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many Iranian students are here temporarily on scholarships from the Iranian Government and fully intend to return to Iran at the completion of their studies. Given the technical background of many students, their U.S. visas are subject to administrative processing and review. Over the past couple of years, however, only one Iranian visa applicant--a female engineering student--has been denied a U.S. visa on national security grounds (in 2006).

¶14. (SBU) Generally, Iranian student organizations appear to be apolitical, serving primarily as a social hub for students of Iranian descent. The executive membership (and we assume the membership at large) is almost exclusively students in the engineering professions and life sciences, career choices that are near certain pathways to well paying jobs after graduation. The events offered (lectures, social events, tutoring, etc.) are similar to those offered by student organizations of other nationalities. Indicative of their non-political orientation, Iranian student organizations criticized a 2007 conference organized by Conrad Grebel University of Waterloo (a Mennonite institution) that invited Iranian scholars from the Imam Khomeini Education and Research Institute in Qom.

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From the Visa Line: One week in Los Angeles, Please  
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¶15. (SBU) From February 2007 to February 2008, Consulate General Toronto issued 811 visas to Iranian citizens. Younger applicants and long-term residents are usually well prepared, polite and cooperative during their interviews. Much of Toronto's Iranian population arrived in Canada in the 1970s and '80s as young adults and became Canadian citizens, who do not need visas to visit the U.S. Their now-elderly parents frequently appear at the Consulate after being in Canada for a short time, seeking visas to visit relatives in the United States. Few of these applicants speak English, and they rely on their children to translate for them. These applicants have often successfully traveled to the United States in the past. Others have been refused in Dubai or Ankara and are trying their luck in Toronto (previously refused applicants

generally receive the same answer in Toronto). Due to the 1 entry, 3 month validity of U.S. visas for Iranians, many applicants are "repeat customers," appearing several times per year. However, we see relatively few applicants who have been in Canada longer than the three year period required for Canadian naturalization, suggesting that many Iranians become Canadian citizens at the earliest possible opportunity. We have heard that the Canadian federal government carefully screens every Iranian citizen who applies for Canadian citizenship or permanent residence.

¶16. (SBU) COMMENT: The Iranian community in Toronto, due to its geographic concentration and relative wealth, has a visibility in the region far exceeding its actual size. A variety of "pull-factors" including a liberal, qualifications-based immigration system, family ties, accessible higher education, and the critical mass of services, mosques, and marriage prospects in the area all work together to ensure that Toronto's Iranian community will continue to grow. The comparative difficulty of immigrating to the U.S., along with Canada's acceptance of large numbers of Iranians after the Islamic revolution and hundreds of thousands of Hong Kong Chinese in the mid-1990s, reinforce Canada's reputation as a safe haven for Iranians or others seeking an antidote to their homeland's political uncertainty and cultural and economic malaise. Toronto's Iranians seem to focus on the usual economic pursuits of recent immigrants. We found them to be comparatively uninterested in domestic politics (Canadian or Iranian) and international relations.  
END COMMENT.

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